

## 1998/Sept JANE SIMMONS - Publishing News

This was to be a phone interview, Jane Simmons not living in - or even near -London. Actually, she doesn't even live on land and can normally only be contacted via mobile phone, which was how Orchard Books got hold of her last year to tell her about the terrific response to *Come on, Daisy!*, the debut picture book that took Bologna by storm. She was, says Simmons, standing in a queue to get her mother's death certificate at the time, which sort of precluded leaping about and celebrating on receipt of the news.

Home for Simmons is an old 1950s trawler called Prosperity "...which, when I'm feeling optimistic," she says, with what I later discover to be her trademark throaty laugh, "is nearly sea-worthy! I took it over a year ago, and now live and work on it." Water and boats have played a big part in Simmons's life for some time; prior to moving to Penryn, where her boat is berthed, she lived on board a tiny ex-ship's lifeboat in Upware, Cambridgeshire, and before that on another boat up North. "I was born in Hampshire, but my Mum was a global traveller," says Simmons, as an explanation of her nomadic lifestyle. "My first school was in Australia!"

If you're beginning to get the notion that the word eccentric might be applicable here, then the fact that she turned up to her very first interview at Orchard on her oil-spewing, 16-year-old Triumph Bonneville motorbike will surely confirm that Simmons isn't your regular children's book person at all. So how did she happen to get into the business? "I was at Anglia Polytechnic University, where I did the Macmillan Prize for a couple of years and won joint 2nd the first time - and no 1st Prize was given," says Simmons. "The next year I got Highly Commended, but no 1st, 2nd or 3rd prizes were given - so no one beat me either time!"

Neither book was published, but Simmons was by now possessed of the writing and illustrating, bug and went looking for a way to do more than just win prizes. "James Mayhew, who'd taught me on one of the Macmillan modules at college, helped me," says Simmons. "I contacted him and he got me into Orchard in the summer of '96. I took all my books and my portfolio, to show them what I could do." In that portfolio was a complete book called

*Ebb and Flo and the Beeping Bird*, which they immediately said they wanted, and then, a couple of months later, she came back with another idea. Although it was just a rough and some artwork, *Come on, Daisy!* was the project the company went for. “It was the first book I’d ever done and I was amazed that I was just left to get on with it,”

She now works mainly in acrylics but started out using oils, painting without the aid of electric light (*Daisy* was completed in that way). “The smell of the turps and the paint and the linseed would wipe me out,” she says, laughing, “and there were moments when I thought I might blow myself up!” Thankfully she never did.